Back Channeling and the "D" Word in a CLT Context

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore potential benefits of drilling, the "D" word, within the context of a CLT classroom. Drilling as a classroom technique has fallen out of favor in the modern post-method era of second language pedagogy. However, a survey of theoretical underpinnings situated within a particular context leads one to believe that there may be benefits for the learners. After reviewing the literature about back channeling and the needs of the students in this context, a classroom technique which implemented drilling of back channels was designed, implemented, and observed. The results of drilling back channels were mixed with both positive and negative examples of pragmatic use, frequency, and variety.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SLA Theory

The post-method era of language teaching generally embraces an approach that draws off the full range of approaches, methods, and techniques in order to best satisfy the needs of the learner depending on the given context. Brown's (2007) informed eclectic approach and Kumaravadivelu's (2006b) pedagogy of particularity are frequently cited advocates of a flexible and adaptable approach which caters to a context. However, there appears to be a hesitancy to endorse a place for rote drilling within CLT classrooms citing the failures of the audio-lingual method of the 1950's. Even among proponents of automatization, drilling as a pedagogical technique is avoided. Gatbon and Segalowitz (1988) recommend "automatizing certain aspects of performance in order to free up attentional resources" (p. 475), but caution against decontextualized drilling pointing to "unsuccessful experiences with traditional automatizing activities" (p. 478). Early experiments with automatizing activities, such as rote repetition and drilling, primarily focused on lexical items or grammatical features and were rooted in behaviorism. The underlying shift in SLA thinking from a behaviorist approach which viewed language acquisition as memorizing patterns and stamping out errors to a communicative approach which prioritizes language in use as both a means and an end has resulted in rote drilling being nearly abandoned as a pedagogical technique. In the spirit of the modern eclectic approach, repetition or drilling as a pedagogical technique should be viewed from cognitive and socio-affective principles in order to evaluate its potential.

Cognitive Principles

Pertaining to individual language acquisition and production, automaticity is a desirable feature of fluency that allows for "a rapid movement away from focus on the forms of language to a focus on the purposes to which language is put" (Brown, 2007, p. 64). A number of cognitive processing models of language acquisition exist rooted in the idea that automaticity can be inhibited when learners are asked to focus on form and meaning simultaneously. Gass and Selinker (2008) break it down in terms of declarative knowledge (*that*) and procedural knowledge (*how*) stating "processing resources are limited and must be distributed economically if communication is to be efficient" (p. 230). A lot has been written about the interface between the two ranging from Krashen's (1985) Monitor Theory which holds to a weak or even zero interface, meaning declarative and procedural knowledge do not interact, to DeKeyser's (1997) strong interface which supports the idea that the declarative becomes procedural through

practice. It is the latter strong interface model that has been embraced by the CLT methodology commonly implemented in classrooms today. The implication for the CLT practitioner is that asking the learner to focus on declarative knowledge (collocation, pronunciation, prosody, and meaning) and execute procedural knowledge (in this case using a back channel appropriately during discourse) may be too large of a cognitive load for the learner while they are attending to the meaning of a discussion.

There are a number of advocates who endorse separating the introduction of declarative knowledge before expecting learners to experiment with forms procedurally. Laufer (2005) suggested FonFs (focus on forms) as a term for pedagogical techniques for non-communicative vocabulary activities such as matching or fill-in-the-blank to allow students attentional resources to make a form meaning link. Peters (2014) echoed the sentiment saying non-communicative activities may be an appropriate way of establishing form meaning connections. Thornbury (2012) further makes a strong case for building automaticity in production in order to take part in real-time conversation.

Further theoretical support of FonFs classroom activities lies in exposure to input and noticing the gap (Swain, 1993). Frequency of exposure to input is commonly held as a prerequisite to second language acquisition. Peters (2014) examined frequency of exposures and retention of lexical items in reading and concluded more is better. While there are some pitfalls to comparing study results across skills, it stands to reason that more exposures on separate occasions will increase the likelihood of retention. If for no other reason than it will increase the odds of the learner recognizing that a form is not currently part of their lexicon, Swain's (1993) noticing the gap. Duff (2000) summarized the need for repetition by saying "frequency of exposure to input is a fundamental factor in determining its saliency and likelihood that it will be noticed" (p. 129).

Without getting too bogged down in the debate over the value of output in language acquisition, it is widely held that output does play some role in language acquisition if for no other reason than "production engages syntactic processing in a way that comprehension does not" (Ellis, 2003, p. 112). The implication for classroom pedagogy is that repetition can routinize the production of language and free up cognitive resources to focus on the meaningful use of language.

Socio-affective Principles

The socio-affective benefits of drilling back channels in this case are heavily influenced by the context and needs of the learners. This study was conducted with primarily homogenous groups of Japanese university freshmen in a classroom with discourse related fluency aims as the primary desired curricular goals. A lot has been written about the perceived short-comings of the Japanese English education approach. Although the typical Japanese university freshman has been exposed to years of compulsory English education, oral production, discourse level language skills, and inter-cultural awareness are relatively low. These students are a product of a language education curriculum that has trained them as if they are linguists studying about language rather than as language users. Meyer (2011) points to the negative washback effect of the test driven approach, an education system that is obsessed with accuracy and form, general output deficiency, and speaking skills rarely if ever being tested. Makarova (2004) also identified the poverty of opportunities for oral production and called for more specific pronunciation training which would implicitly necessitate some kind of de-contextualized drilling. Neustupny and Tanaka (2004) repeated these concerns about the lack of focus on oral production and communicative competence in their call for an overhaul of the language

education approach in Japan. The lack of focus on oral proficiency has left the modern Japanese English learner ill prepared to communicate effectively. Makarova (2004) made note that the learners themselves are acutely aware of their shortcomings and desired more practice with authentic communication. Yashima (2002) further established a clear relationship between Japanese students' self-perceived confidence and socio-affective variables that lend to WTC.

In light of these findings, drilling back channels was chosen as a suitable language focus to drill. Foremost, back channels, even when presented and drilled in FonFs manner, retain high surrender value (Edwards, 2000). In other words, the students will be able to immediately put the back channel phrases in to use during the same lesson. Also, back channeling is one of the universal elements for framing and structuring discussions (Goffman, 1974). While back channeling provides several important discursive functions (Maynard, 1997; Duncan & Neiderhe, 1974; O'Keefe & Adolph, 2008), the Japanese students in this context are unfamiliar with the pragmatic inter-cultural differences in usage since it is heavily culturally and contextually specific (Cutrone, 2005). Inappropriate usage can result in miscommunication or appearing deceptive to native speakers such as in cases where native Japanese speakers use continuers (yeah, ok, uh-huh) in instances where they don't understand or disagree (Cutrone, 2010). Given the perceived difficulty for the learner in executing the procedural "*how*" of backchanneling in English, it stands to reason that a little bit of oral FonFs drilling would give the learners a chance to sort out their declarative "*that*" knowledge of the backchannel forms before they are expected to use them in discourse.

Additionally, presenting and drilling back channels can serve several socio-affective principles. Intrinsic motivation may be increased through the student feeling that they are being taught authentic language and not "test English". Simply getting the opportunity to orally produce the phrases should bolster self-confidence and lessen communication inhibition. Furthermore, students' receptive awareness of the broader use of back channeling in English may increase even if they are unable to produce (Duncan & Neiderhe, 1974). Repair strategies that can prevent communication breakdown may become automatized for quick recall. Given the previous formal accuracy focused learning experiences of the students in this context a, little rote drilling can also function as a tether to their previous learning experiences. The safety of the group repetition in the early stages of a lesson can serve to build solidarity among group members and facilitate a positive inter-group climate that leads to an open willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, P. D., Clement, R., Dornyei, Z., & Noels, K. A., 1998).

THE CLASSROOM TECHNIQUE

Materials

In accordance with Cutrone's (2010) suggestion that "JEFL learners would benefit from trying to use a more diverse repertoire of back channels" (p. 29), cards with four functional categories, a variety of back channels, and short descriptions of functional use were prepared (Appdx. 1 and Appdx. 2). Before preparing the cards, suggestions for useful functional categories and common back channel words or phrases were solicited from instructors in the same teaching context with the intent of avoiding cultural bias. By surveying the suggested backchannels and getting feedback from participants about functional use, four primary functional categories were identified as: continuation (simply signaling to the speaker that you want them to keep speaking), showing surprise (this category could have been called emotive responses), showing sympathy (again this could also fall under emotive), and understanding (phrases which ask the speaker to repeat or in other ways demonstrate degree of understanding). With the assistance of a native

Japanese speaker, these functional categories were translated in to Japanese with the intent of making the form meaning connection as accessible as possible. For each functional category, four or five phrases were supplied. The cards were printed in color and laminated. Attention was given to not overlap with the back channels supplied in the text book and to provide more casual, daily-use English examples in order to facilitate the student perception of being taught authentic English.

PROCEDURE

In order to facilitate the greater aims of the curriculum and mitigate the negatives associated with decontextualized drilling, the technique was embedded within the Fluency Practice of the standard lesson. The Fluency Practice provides an immediate need for listeners to back channel. Typically, students are assigned listener and speaker roles and provided with a speaking prompt written on the white board at the front of the class room. The speakers are given three minutes to talk about the topic and the listeners are told to give English reactions. For this class room technique, after the listener and speaker roles are assigned, the listeners are each given a back channeling card. The listeners are instructed to practice and repeat the back channels led by the instructor. A tertiary benefit of this activity is that it gives the assigned speakers a bit of time to think and prepare before they have to speak. The listeners perform oral repetitions in chorus for roughly thirty seconds and again are encouraged to practice their backchannels while they are listening to their speaker. In this context, the curriculum has specifically recognized the importance of back channeling to develop discourse skills. However, the functional categories and language are slightly different. The students are familiar with the curricular requirement presented as Communication Skills which includes English Reactions, Agree/disagree, Follow Up Questions, and Checking Understanding. There is clearly considerable overlap with the back channeling functional categories recommended by Maynard (1997), Duncan and Neiderhe (1974), and O'Keefe and Adolph (2008), but for the sake of simplicity and clarity, all of the backchannels are collective referred to as Reactions. The students are encouraged to use the backchannels simply by instructing them to "Be a good listener, help your speaker, and practice your reactions!" The process is repeated when the students change listener and speaker roles.

VARIATIONS

Ordinarily, a primary consideration for adapting an activity is the proficiency level of the students. However, it seems that proficiency level is not always the best indicator of students' WTC, inter-cultural competence or ability to use effective communication skills such as back channeling. Therefore, the variations of the activity typically were in the timing and frequency of the drilling as opposed to different versions of functional categories or phrases on the cards themselves. Although, depending on the performance and needs of the class, altering the functional categories or phrases may be beneficial. Classes which demonstrate high back channeling proficiency could benefit from new categories and phrases as a means to expand their repertoire.

For all classes, the activity was repeated as described above for the first five lessons with the primary intent of fostering intergroup solidarity and facilitating WTC as well as creating some awareness of inter-cultural back channeling differences. The drilling can be phased out for classes which exhibit strong willingness to experiment with and use the back channels. For these groups, simply distributing the cards and reminding the students to practice and experiment is enough to facilitate performance. For classes that exhibit communication

apprehension and do not experiment or practice the back channels, the drilling can be repeated after the first cycle of the Fluency Practice. In some cases, skipping the initial chorus repetition and waiting until the second phase of the Fluency Practice may serve to heighten the saliency and need for effective back channeling skills.

DISCUSSION

The effects of the activity on student performance are difficult to assess since there is no control group and variations in performance may be related to any number of socio-affective factors such as group dynamic or intrinsic motivation and individual idiosyncrasies which can vary widely. However, casual classroom observations, a review of class notes taken during discussions, and referring to discussion test results indicate a generally positive trend. Effect use of back channels can be assessed in terms of frequency, range, and pragmatic appropriateness.

Frequency, not surprisingly for students accustomed to extrinsic test driven motivation, tended to peak during discussion tests. Virtually every student was able to achieve the full points in the "English Reactions" portion of the discussion test which essentially is a broad encompassing term for back channeling. Additionally, the vast majority of students far exceeded the minimum quantity of reactions to achieve full points. By this measure alone, the activity would appear to be extremely effective. However, the frequency of back channel use in the Fluency Practice and regular class discussions was a mix of successes and failures. In the Fluency Practice, a percentage of students referred to the cards and gave an adequate, sometimes excessive, number of back channels. Many students needed to be prompted and reminded to give English style back channels instead of using the Japanese style back channeling. In every class, there were one or two students who simply did not feel comfortable back channeling in English or Japanese. Additionally, back channeling frequency seemed to dip during regular class discussions. While some students continued supply ample back channels, others felt comfortable taking a back seat and not actively participating. The only time this did not happen was during the discussion tests.

The range of back channel use also varied considerably between individuals and different stages of the lesson. By far, the widest range of use and experimentation came in the initial stages of the Fluency Practice in the early stages of the semester. As the semester wore on, there was clearly attrition in the range of back channel use. It appears that the students started to settle in to a pattern of mapping their Japanese L1 pragmatic strategies on to the English back channels. For instance, basic continuation back channels such as "yeah" and "ok" were by far the most used. A number of students did grasp on to some other continuation back channels like "tell me more" and "and…" but the use of these exemplars were almost exclusively limited to the Fluency Practice. The second most frequently used type of back channel was the emotive "showing surprise" functional category. Many students used "really", "wow", and "unbelievable" with some frequency. Very few students experimented with other expressions like "seriously" or "no way". It may be that "seriously" presents some difficulties in pronunciation for native Japanese speakers and "no way" intuitively feels negative. The largest range increase appears to be in the emotive "expressing sympathy" category. Although the frequency was not as high as would be expected, instances of back channels expressing sympathy, specifically "that's too bad" were manifested in all stages of the lesson. However, there did seem to be some aversion to expressions with intuitively negative words such as "that's *no* good" and "oh *no*". The least used functional category was the understanding, specifically, any kind of back channel that would indicate lack of understanding to the speaker. Some of the

students would use "one more time" when they needed to tell the speaker that they didn't understand. However, there were very few instances of students using "I don't understand". In most cases, the students would back channel their lack of understanding Japanese style by saying "eh?" with rising intonation. When pressed to use the English back channels, many students would resort to "I *can't* understand" instead of using the "I *don't* understand" as presented on the cards as well as in the text book. This appears to be a manifestation of the cross-cultural competency issues facing Japanese students mentioned by Cutrone (2010) rooted in a deeper cultural expectancy of not performing face threatening acts. In short, many students exhibited some increase in range by picking up a few back channels that were not previously in their lexicon, but very few students grasped on to a full range of functional use.

Generally, the pragmatic effectiveness of the back channels was very good. Students seemed to grasp the functional categories well and implement the back channels procedurally effectively. There were very few instances of pragmatic misunderstanding with two exceptions. First, there were several instances of the "understanding" functional category being used as an avoidance tactic when students were asked a question that they did not want to answer. For instance, a student was asked "Do you have a boyfriend?" and responded with "I don't understand" presumably as an indirect way of back channeling that she did not want to answer the question. Second, although convergence tokens (O'Keefe & Adolphs, 2008) don't appear on the activity cards themselves, agreeing and disagreeing is a back channeling skill actively promoted in the class and almost all students exhibited hesitancy to disagree. Many students would resort to saying "I totally agree, but…" in instances where they clearly disagreed. This is most likely another example of mismatched cross-cultural pragmatics and the perception in Japanese culture that disagreeing with an opinion, no matter how innocuous, is viewed as face threatening. Again, these examples appear to be manifestations of the need for back channeling instruction to include "dimensions of intercultural competence, which deal with conversational satisfaction, expectancy, and perceptions across cultures" (Spitzberg, 2000).

CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of the experimental activity remains inconclusive. While the intuitive observations of the instructor may be useful to the instructor for this particular context, they provide little evidence concerning the success or validity of the drilling activity. The pedagogical efficacy of the activity could better be assessed through a step-by-step empirically based methodological approach. First establish control and experimental groups for comparison. Then, record and transcribe student-student discussions for analysis. Establish guidelines for what constitutes a back channel and identify all tokens. One point of comparison between the control group who did not receive the rote drilling pedagogic technique and the experimental group who did is simply a raw frequency count. The back channels can then be grouped in to functional categories and variation in number of tokens and functional range can be made. After identifying the functional purpose of the back channel tokens, individual instances can be contextualized in the discourse and qualitatively analyzed for pragmatic effectiveness. The data can be compared across proficiency levels and longitudinally over time as well to gain insight into the durative effect. By combining techniques from discourse analysis and conversational analysis traditions to analyze the collected data, the effectiveness of drilling back channels as a pedagogical technique in this context may become clearer.

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APPENDIX A - Back channels categorized by pragmatic use.

English Reactions			
相づちを打つ時	驚いた時	同情する時	繰り返してほしい時
OK	**Really?**	**That's too bad**	**One more time**
Right	**No way**	**Sorry to hear that**	**Can you say it again?**
Sure	**Wow**	**That's no good**	**I don't understand**
Uh-huh	**Seriously?**	**Oh no**	**Tell me more**
Yeah	**Unbelievable**		**I don't follow you**

APPENDIX B – Back channels categorized by pragmatic use (version 2)

English Reactions II			
相づちを打つ時	驚いた時	同情する時	繰り返してほしい時
I'm Listening	**Unreal**	**That's a shame**	**Sorry?**
And…	**You're kidding**	**Unlucky**	**What?**
Of Course	**What!?**	**Tough Break**	**I didn't catch that**
cool	**No way!**	**That sucks**	**What do you mean?**
			I don't get it